

Annual Address by President Kitts
Norton Auditorium
August 21, 2018

Good afternoon, colleagues. It's good to see you. Whether you have been on campus all summer or are just now returning after a break, I welcome you here today as we begin the 2018-19 academic year. I'm very thankful that Dena is here with me today – and you should be thankful as well, because she will keep me on schedule and ensure that we get out of here on time.

When you live where we do, it is amazing to watch a campus come back to life as the new year approaches. You not only see it but you hear it as well. We hear work crews from facilities out and about early in the morning cleaning the fountain, sweeping walkways, and generally making sure this gem of a campus WOWs another generation of students. We hear shouts and grunts and groans coming from the practice field as our sports teams prepare to face the best of the best this fall. We hear our marching band, practicing in 95 degree heat and learning their show under Dr. Jones and Dr. Wiggins. Just a few evenings ago, Dena and I heard a sustained low rumble and thought that Leo must be really agitated. It turned out to be our drum line.

I have worked at institutions where this opening address is framed as the president's "state of the university" speech. That always seemed a bit much to me, but at the same time it is true that this is the only opportunity I have to get in front of you as a group to talk about where we are at as a university. Permit me to begin these remarks with the simple observation that this University -- our University -- is healthy, strong, and growing. Collectively, I think we are doing a great job of fulfilling our mission.

Let's talk about growth. This is the time of year where we get questions about the number of students we expect in the fall semester. That's a tricky proposition this year because we won't have a "final final" number for a while. Census date has been pushed back until late October for a very good reason – the expansion of our eight week classes, including a second eight week session that begins in October. Without a later census date, there would be students in those sessions left forever uncounted, and we can't let that happen. Right now enrollment tallies in Alabama are about bragging rights, but the day is coming where funding will be tied to those numbers. We are getting ahead of that curve by moving census to a date that will be more accurate and inclusive of total fall enrollment.

The end of October is over two months away, but with each passing day we are getting a clearer picture of fall enrollment. Our trend line shows us running about 2% ahead of last year in both headcount and CHP. What does that mean? Well, our record enrollment was set two years ago with almost 7,500 students, and we were close to that mark again last year. If this percentage increase continues to hold, our final fall enrollment tally will be around 7,600 students. I think we have a good chance of realizing or even surpassing that mark. This is good news, and as these numbers continue to firm up, we will keep you posted and celebrate milestones if and when records fall.

But while the overall number is impressive, we want our growth at UNA to be smart, manageable, and sustainable. These days they call this enterprise "enrollment *management*" for a reason. The challenge to us is to not only to generate growth but to shape our enrollment in a manner that aligns well with our infrastructure, identity, and aspirations as an institution. Consequently, what you will notice about this fall's enrollment is that our number of new undergraduate students will be level with last year – healthy, but level. Our growth is coming in areas such as graduate enrollment, online programs, and adult learners. For UNA, growth in these targeted areas makes great sense. These students don't need a parking place at 9:00am, they don't need premium housing in one of our nicer residence halls, and they do not require the same level of scholarship support as do our freshmen. Provost Ross Alexander has been an important voice in identifying these strategic points of enrollment emphasis, and I wish to thank him for that contribution.

Speaking of graduate enrollment, that sector now accounts for over 15% of our total headcount – a figure that is almost certain to rise as we add additional Master's programs and launch plans for our first doctoral degrees. This type of growth is consistent with our development as a mature and more comprehensive regional university. To date, we have been able to effect this growth in graduate enrollment without much central coordination. But that model has its limits, and the day is coming soon when we will need to have a conversation about adding a dedicated Graduate Programs office to support these students and the faculty and staff who work with them.

Another bright spot for this fall is international student enrollment. In June, I travelled with Dr. Zhang to Mexico to negotiate a new partnership with La Salle University in Mexico City. For once, Dr. Zhang needed me to help with translation. After all, Spanish was one of my minors in college. I had even studied in Mexico as a student ... in 1984. Surprisingly, it turns out that you lose language ability when you don't use it for 34 years! But with luck, patience from our Mexican hosts, and a few timely assists from Google translate, we were able to lay the groundwork for that new partnership.

But back to the main story line. News reports indicate that international student enrollment is down sharply in the U.S. this year. Meanwhile, here at UNA, Dr. Zhang and his staff continue to perform miracles over in Powers Hall. Our intake of international students this fall will double that of previous years, and our overall international enrollment will be up by some 20% when all is said and done. This growing body of international students is an important component when we think about diversity at UNA.

Ladies and gentlemen, make no mistake about it: to prepare our students to function in this very complex world of the 21st century, we have to be proactive about ensuring that both our student population and faculty and staff ranks feature diversity in its broadest sense. We need diversity in national origin, background, lifestyle, gender, race, and ethnicity. Ron Patterson is doing an outstanding job of leading our diversity efforts, and we are now entering year two of an ambitious five-year plan to ensure that diversity at UNA is more than a bumper sticker. We have to model it and live it and champion this commitment in all that we do. I ask that you join me as we follow the lead of Ron Patterson, Joan Williams, and others in working to make sure that we value and respect all members of this campus community.

On a related note, one of my proudest moments this past year was the day that we dedicated the Wendell W. Gunn University Commons. I remember the first time I mentioned that idea to my colleagues on the Executive Council. They loved it, and with their help, this became a recommendation to the Board of Trustees. Our trustees embraced the idea with an enthusiastic and unanimous vote, and then we turned to many of you for help with planning to make sure the event would celebrate Dr. Gunn and the importance of his story for UNA. It was a good day, a powerful day, and a healing day.

Moving from the sublime to the not so sublime, let's talk for a second about funding. By now some of you might be getting sick of hearing about Project 208. If so... sorry! I need to steel you for additional disappointment because I cannot stand down on this topic. Most of you know the basic contours of this issue. UNA has fallen far behind our sister schools in Alabama when it comes to state support on a per-student basis. In fact, we are dead last among the 14 universities.

So last year we initiated Project 208 and mounted a full court press in Montgomery to get this issue on the radar of key decision-makers. We had success. Our state allocation increased by almost \$2 million dollars for FY 2019. These are recurring dollars, and they help more than you know. Because of these extra funds, we were able to forego a tuition increase this year. And of interest to everyone in this room, this increase means that we are going to be able to include a COLA in the budget proposal we carry to the Board next month. Stay tuned for details as we monitor enrollment and determine how much revenue we have to work with.

Now for the bad news. Despite our good showing this past year, we remain in a very distant last place in terms of per-student funding in Alabama. In dollar terms, we are \$24 million dollars below the state average -- and that's \$24 million dollars each year, every year that we are not getting. That means that, over the last decade, we have missed out on a *quarter of a billion dollars* that other schools of comparable size received and we did not. Isn't that staggering? Underfunding of this magnitude must be seen for what it is: a very real threat to the future of this wonderful institution. How can any enterprise survive over the long term if forced to operate on a fraction of the revenue enjoyed by its competitors? This cannot continue.

We are already working very hard behind the scenes to freshen our arguments and implement a strategy for the 2019 legislative session. I will be calling on many of you to help through making phone calls or through opening doors for me with alumni of influence. More generally, here's something you can all do. Stay informed and active on this issue. Get to know your state representative and your state senator on a first name basis. Write to them. Be polite. Remember to thank them for what they did to help us last year, but then remind them that our hole remains very deep and that we need even more help this year and in subsequent years just to get out of last place.

Along the way, let's all remember to stress the positive about UNA. I don't want my grouching about our low funding to sound like a whine (nobody likes a whiner) or, worse, to suggest that we are not fulfilling our mission because of lack of resources. That's just not true. As faculty and staff, you excel at doing more with less. We are experiencing unprecedented success. This university is on the move, and I could not be prouder to call you my colleagues and to brag about your successes, which I do early and often.

So, bringing these two threads together, my elevator talk in Montgomery this year is going to focus first on the many wonderful things going on at UNA. Then I will pivot and remind our lawmakers that we are getting these results with the lowest funding of any university – and then I will invite those same lawmakers to imagine with me the even greater things we could do for region and state if only we were treated fairly and funded at an average level.

My talking points on success come from you. Our nursing program ranks consistently as one of the very best in the state of Alabama. Kilby Laboratory School, an extension of our College of Education and Human Sciences, is rated in the top 2% of all schools in the state of Alabama. Our business programs uplift the region through a focus on entrepreneurialism and economic development. The College of Business is also home to the largest MBA program in Alabama. The College of Arts and Sciences is home to rapidly growing programs in engineering technology – programs that have caught the attention of corporate leaders in the Huntsville area. Elsewhere in that college, faculty members carry our name throughout the nation through their research, exhibitions, and performances. As but one case in point, Dr. Ansley Quiros in our History Department had two guest columns published in *The Washington Post* this past spring. Other professors in that same department have positioned UNA as a national leader on the Trail of Tears project.

Then there is the news coming out of our Athletics Department, which just over a month ago made the official jump to the Division I ranks of the NCAA. This move has generated excitement with scheduling announcements that feature the return of old rivalries with Alabama A&M, Jacksonville State, and Troy, as well as exciting non-conference contests against national powers including Alabama, Auburn, Xavier, Tennessee, BYU and Gonzaga. And six weeks into this transition, we're 2-0 against D-I opponents. These are all markers of excellence, and coupled with the launch of our new Honors College and the School of the Arts, it is clear that we are making good on our commitment to become a Division I institution in all areas.

When you step back and look at these developments in their totality, you begin to see a theme, and it is one of EMERGENCE. As an institution, we are finding our voice and projecting our influence on a regional and even national stage as never before. We need to keep this momentum going. There might be a sweet sentimentality in the notion that we're the best kept secret in Alabama, but candidly we must put that notion behind us and accept our rightful place alongside the best regional universities.

Now let me be clear on an important point. Just because we are growing and emerging does not mean that we're going to quit doing what we do well. One of the things I love about UNA is that we are comfortable in our own skin. We remain a teaching-oriented university that serves this region well and that offers educational opportunities to a wide range of students. I think we also do a great job of keeping our focus on our core mission of education. That mission is much the same today as it was on January 11, 1830, when LaGrange College opened its doors on that beautiful hilltop over in Leighton. As in 1830, we continue to change lives one student at a time by delivering a high quality, high impact educational experience.

As I begin to wrap this up, I invite you to consider with me two students whose lives were changed by this University. Earlier I mentioned the naming of the Commons for Dr. Wendell Wilkie Gunn. Wendell is so well known as the man who broke the color barrier here that it is easy to focus on his entry to the University at the expense of what followed. You see, Dr. Gunn entered this institution as a transfer student in 1963, but then he stayed, and he graduated on time in 1965. He was, by all accounts, an outstanding student who excelled in his classes. Although majoring in the sciences, he indulged a passion for music by joining the UNA choir – and one day found himself singing a solo in front of Gov. George Wallace. From UNA, Wendell went on to earn an MBA from the University of Chicago, then he ended up serving as a trade advisor in the Reagan White House before moving to a corporate career with Chase Manhattan Bank and Pepsi. And yet, despite these high-flying stops in a high-flying career, the place that looms large in Dr. Gunn's imagination is UNA. Dr. Gunn now lives in Connecticut but travels back to campus frequently. He's writing his memoirs, and he wants to do that here. He's fascinated by what this University has become, and he loves to watch students of all backgrounds

interact so freely in the building that now carries his name. He told me recently, “Ken, I’ve fallen in love with my *alma mater*.”

Another great story is that of Mary Alice Young, a native of Lauderdale County who always wanted to be a teacher. Mary Alice graduated from Central High School and enrolled here, only back then we were Florence State Teachers College. She graduated from Florence State in 1948 and immediately returned to her home community where she embarked on a 40 year teaching career at Central Elementary School. She is still a legend in that community. Ms. Young worked hard, lived modestly, and changed countless lives through her caring instruction. She passed away last year. Unbeknownst to most of us was the extent to which she carried this university in her heart for well over half a century. I didn’t know it. But I found out about Mary Alice Young’s story in a big way last Wednesday when VP Debbie Shaw and I were summoned to a local law office for the settlement of Ms. Young’s estate. When we arrived, one of Ms. Young’s former students greeted us, a gentleman now in his 70s. After exchanging pleasantries, he handed me a check for *\$1.2 million dollars*. Mary Alice Young, the school teacher who had lived so modestly, wanted to do something special for her beloved *alma mater*, and so she provided this bequest in her will to fund scholarships for our education majors.

There is a common thread that runs through these stories, and it is that UNA made a difference in 1830, it made a difference for Ms. Young, and it made a difference for Dr. Gunn. And guess what? Beginning at 8:00am tomorrow morning we’re going to have the opportunity to make a difference for about 7,600 young men and women. I’m willing to bet that there will be a few Wendells and Mary Alices in that group as well.

Dena and I appreciate you more than you know, and we hope that you have a great year. Thank you, and Roar Lions!